DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 780 HE 022 820

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TITLE Asian Students in North American Universities: Implications for Faculty and Staff.
PUB DATE Jun 89
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the World Congress of Comparative Education (7th, Montreal, Canada, June 26-30, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Advising; *College Environment; College Students; Counseling; *Cultural Differences; *Culture Conflict; *Foreign Students; Higher Education; *Student Adjustment; Student Attitudes; Student Needs; Student Problems; Values
IDENTIFIERS *Asians

ABSTRACT

When Asian students decide to study in North American colleges or universities, they expect to experience differences in the new environment, but the actual experiences often cause conflict at such basic levels of life and study that the students need assistance from Canadian or United States faculty or staff in order to achieve the original educational goals. Some of the causes of educational, as well as personal, conflict that Asian students experience in North American colleges and universities are discussed, including: the reluctance of Asians to utilize counseling services, and their relative lack of knowledge about such services; a lack of understanding of the concept of mental health; counselors' lack of knowledge of other cultures; and differing expectations about counseling. Some strategies useful in advising or counseling Asian students are discussed, including: helping the student to understand the nature of culture; paying special attention to the client's cultural values and specific way of approaching problems; and taking a more active role in the process than with Caucasian clients. Implications of the increasing number of foreign students are also discussed. Contains 21 references. (KM)

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When Asian students decide to study in North American colleges or universities, they expect to experience differences in the new environment, but the actual experiences often cause conflict at such basic levels of life and study that the students need assistance from Canadian or United States faculty or staff in order to achieve the original educational goals. This paper discusses some of the causes of educational, as well as personal, conflict Asian students experience in North American colleges and universities, and presents some goals and strategies useful to faculty and staff in advising or counseling their Asian students.

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HE 022 820

Asian Students in North American Universities: Implications for Faculty and Staff

Pheny (Shang-fen) Zhou Smith & Harold A. Smith

Although international students represent different races, nationalities, cultural backgrounds, values, beliefs, attitudes, experiences and goals, they will face many similar problems during their sojourn in Canada or the United States. Because they are entering a different culture in the U.S., cultural adjustment is inevitably encountered by all Asian students and is frequently more traumatic than for North American subcultures.

Everyone was born into and taught in some distinctive culture, that is a pattern of perceptions which is accepted and expected by an identity group (Singer, 1971). Each culture is organized around commonly ordered assumptions, fundamental preferences and standards of judgement. Different cultures possess different values. Although individuals are influenced differently by their cultural background, Hall (1977, p. 5) notes, "one of the functions of culture is to provide a highly selective screen between man and the outside world. In its many forms, culture therefore designates what we pay attention to and what we ignore. This screening provides structure for the world." In most cases the culture provides a standard by which its members perceive the world. In other words, individuals' values are highly influenced by the culture within which they live. Those values serve as a filter through which individuals select and organize a coherent view of their surroundings out of the much richer range of possible choices with which life confronts them (Smith, 1987).

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When a person decides to go abroad to study, he or she expects to find some differences in the new place. Unfortunately, these expectations are generally limited to different customs -- doing things differently. It becomes a source of conflict to discover the differences are not limited to customs, but actually question deeply held personal values.

Oberg (1960) first introduced the term "culture shock" to describe the result of discovering such deep differences. Culture shock should be viewed as an "occupational disease" for Asian students, which results from their suddenly being introduced to a culture that is very different from their own (Church, 1982). Culture shock is considered to be the negative aspect of cultural adjustment and usually involves such symptoms as fascination, anxiety, helplessness, depression, irritability, extreme loneliness and a longing for a more predictable and gratifying environment (Thomas, 1985; Church, 1982; Alder, 1975; Arensberg & Niehoff, 1964; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Lundstedt, 1963; Foster, 1962; Oberg, 1960).

Oberg (1960, p.177) pointed out that "culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse." When developing a Culture Shock Inventory, W.J. Redden (1975) defined culture shock as a psychological disorientation which results from misunderstanding or failing to understand the cues from another culture.

The outcomes of Asian students' North American educational experience largely depend on how they adjust to the host country. Misunderstanding has caused considerable frustration, irritability, distress and even crisis. Various studies have shown that from 15-25% of all international students have significant difficulty in

cultural adjustment and fail to complete their academic goals in the host country (Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Hull, 1978; Jammaz, 1973; Shepard, 1970; Akhun, 1961). This should attract the attention of faculty and staff in colleges and universities who may be official or unofficial advisors and counselors to Asian students. This paper will discuss some of the barriers to successfully advising or counseling Asian students and why faculty and staff who are not normally trained as professional counselors may be called on by Asian students. Although many parallels exist with Asian Americans, this paper specifically addresses Asian students who are non-immigrants. Possible goals and strategies for working with this specific group will be discussed.

In 1987, during the 39th National Conference of NAFSA (National Association for Foreign Student Affairs), over 60 foreign student advisors and counselors attended a workshop on "Cross-cultural Counseling with the Asian Student." During that workshop, a common report was that Asian students, especially East Asians, utilized mental health facilities at an extremely low rate. Since many studies have indicated that Asian students, like other foreign students, encounter many problems related to their physical and psychological adjustment to a host culture, a major question arising from the NAFSA report is what the reasons or barriers are impeding Asian students' seeking professional help with adjustment problems. In order to understand the answer to this question, one must have a basic knowledge and understanding of Asian culture and Asian expectations about professional counseling.

First, in Asian culture, family, as a socializing agent for its offspring, has a very long history. The position of the family is so central in Asia that children are taught not to rely on anyone other than family members when they are in dangerous or difficult

situations. This tradition and attitude has resulted in an atmosphere which is unfavorable to the counseling profession. Counseling as a profession only emerged in some Asian countries during the last decade, e.g., Indonesia and Taiwan. In some Asian countries, it is still nonexistant, e.g., The People's Republic of China. Many people only have a very hazy knowledge about what counseling is. Many simply do not know there is such a profession in the world. On the other hand, because the counseling profession is so familiar in Canada and the United States, many times we simply expect everyone in the world to know about it.

Second, in many Asian societies, such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean, the concept of mental health or psychological well-being is not clearly understood. In fact, in many Asian cultures, there is no clear distinction between mental and physical illness or health. Many societies only separate people into two categories: crazy people and normal people. Once a person is considered crazy, he will lose all social status and respect in society. Finding a job, getting married and satisfying other basic human needs become extremely difficult or even impossible. People simply treat the "crazy" person as if they are crazy. This societal attitude toward people who have mental or psychological problems, together with a lack of understanding about the purposes of counseling and psychological professions, have caused fear among many international students. The fear of being labeled "crazy" once they see a psychologist or counselor is probably one of the main reasons impeding their use of these two professions. Even if they know it is possible to use counselors and psychologists as helping resources on American campuses, they are not likely to use them. The fear of being labeled crazy by their countrymen or their institution is so

strong, it simply makes the utilization of mental health facilities out of the question.

Third, when Asian students do seek help from the mental health services on their campuses, one common problem encountered is the counselor's lack of knowledge about other cultures. Because adjustment problems and culture shock are caused by differences between one's cultural and personal values and those met in the host country, if a counselor lacks knowledge about the client's culture, he or she will be unable to see the problem from the client's point of view. That is, not be able to correctly identify the problems the client faces. Counseling, as a process of interpersonal interaction and communication, heavily depends on the abilities of the counselor and client to appropriately and accurately send and receive both verbal and nonverbal messages (Sue & Sue, 1977). If the counselor does not understand the international client's culturally related emotional experience and expression, he or she will not be able to communicate effectively with the client. Furthermore, the ineffective communication may increase the client's feeling of being unlike the counselor or strengthen stereotypes about the counselor's cultural group. The end result will hinder the establishment of desired counseling rapport and counselor influence. The experience of one of the authors, a Chinese student, could illustrate this unfortunate effect.

> "Several months after arriving in the United States, the cultural distinctions between China and the U.S. became increasingly noticeable; confronted by new values, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs and lifestyles confusion and frustration led to a feeling of slowly falling apart. I went to a counselor where we spent about an hour during the first session discussing my problems. I was the one

who did most of the talking. The counselor only responded occasionally with a few nonrelevant words. As the session progressed, so did my disappointment and unease because I felt what I was saying must sound like a fairy tale, or strange soap opera, to my counselor. I knew she, too, was confused and did not understand me. Finally, it was time to finish the first session. The counselor said it was nice to talk with me. Although she did not understand what I said completely, she would like to work with me more. I was so upset when I got home, it was very difficult to discuss my deeply embedded feelings with a stranger. It was only because I felt that I could bear no more that I had decided to try a counselor. I had expected to at least receive comfort or sympathy. Instead, I received disappoint-ment at having wasted my time talking with a person who was part of what was making me frustrated in the first place."

As commonly happens among Asian students, the student decided not to attend any more counseling sessions.

The final point concerning Asian students is that there are discrepancies between the counselor's and the Asian students' expectations about counseling. Counselors trained in North America usually use an indirect intervention counseling style to help clients gain insight into their problems with the expectation that after the clients understand their problems, they will take responsibility to either take action or decide what should be done by themselves. They expect the clients to be verbally, emotionally and behaviorally expressive and, further, to know what counseling is like before they come to the first session. They expect the client to take major responsibility for initiating conversation in the session while they play a less active

role. To the contrary, Asian students have been raised in cultures which emphasize the respect of elders and authority figures and "not to speak until spoken to" (Sue & Sue, 1977). They view the counselor as an authority figure prescribing more definite and clear-cut solutions to their problems while they assume a more passive and dependent role. Asian students' expectancies, together with their unfamiliarity with counseling as a helping resource can partly account for their reticence at using professional help as an effective alternative in solving their psychological problems (Yuen & Tinsley, 1981).

The typical counseling process in North America, which arranges 50 minutes of time for each session and spreads the sessions over a long period, is a potential threat to all international students whose native languages are not English. Because of their language deficiency, they need much more time to do their studies than do American students (Smith, 1987). In addition to attending classes, studying at least eight hours a day is not unusual for most of them, especially graduate students. Under such high academic pressure and rigid time schedule, it is not likely for any of them to consider spending long periods of time with a counselor.

Suggested Strategies for Advising and Counseling Asian Students

This paper is based on certain assumptions. Most persons reading this paper will not be trained in advising and counseling techniques, which are highly individualized processes. The goals and strategies used should, therefore, be oriented toward the academic field of the faculty member or the depth of cross-cultural

understanding of the faculty member or staff member, and furthermore, should vary according to specific problems and individuals. It is probably impossible, and certainly beyond the scope of this paper, to discuss all specific goals and strategies encountered when advising or counseling Asian students. However, everything discussed in this paper is generated on common bases that can serve as the general understanding and direction when working with Asian students. The reader is cautioned to remember that individual differences must be taken into account in actual practice. The following suggestions will be limited to dealing with one type of problem encountered by Asian students. That is the kind of problem caused by differences in values or value conflicts between the home country and the host country.

Although international students represent different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, values, beliefs, attitudes, experiences and goals, one thing they share is that they are in North America for a comparatively short time and will, in most cases, return to their home countries after completing their academic goals. Unlike the immigrant who is breaking old ties while establishing new ones, the international student needs to retain identification with the home culture and its customs and values, since that is where he will live and function for the rest of his life.

By no means, in this case, should complete acculturation take place during the sojourn period. When encountering value conflicts, the goal of advising or counseling should be to help the international student understand that there are many diverse values existing between different cultures. These are caused by the fact that people evaluate things from different points of view. There is no superiority among cultures,

only differences.

In fact, one of the goals of international students is growth within the context of his own cultural background and gaining appreciation for the cultural background of the educational institution and of other students (Brown, 1972, p. 36). Through the sojourn experience, the international student can understand the roots of his or her own ethnocentrism and gain new perspectives and outlooks on the nature of culture (Adler, 1975). Once the student is helped to understand the nature of culture, the depression or other difficulties caused by value conflicts should be reduced. Adoption of the host culture is not necessary; it is not even desirable. What is important is to adapt to the host culture and function in it to a relatively comfortable degree while maintaining their own cultural identity and gaining fuller understanding of the host culture.

When actually working with Asian students, the counselor should pay special attention to the client's cultural values and specific way of approaching problems. Because Asian cultures highly stress the restraint of potentially disruptive emotions, going to a counselor might be felt as a shame by the client and his countrymen. The confidential nature of counseling should be clearly stated by the counselor in order to reduce the client's tension. Also, during the problem exploration phase of the session, group work probably is not a proper approach to help the client to talk about his problems. Asians prefer working with an individual/private base when dealing with private problems.

Another consideration for counselors, when working with Asian students, is that because Asians are raised in a culture which emphasizes respect of elders and

authority figures, they usually adopt a passive position when confronting authority figures. They expect to get concrete advice and specific answers directly from the authority figure. When working with this group of students, the advisor or counselor should take a more active role in the process, unlike working with North American Caucasian clients where non-directive approaches are emphasized. The directive, advice type of approaches are probably more proper and comfortable for the Asian students. Again, individual differences should be considered when working with specific individuals.

Conclusion and Implications

Increasing numbers of students and exchange scholars from other countries are coming to American colleges and universities each year. Because of the differences between their home cultures and American culture, they inevitably experience depression and tension caused by value conflicts. Various studies have shown that from 15-25% of all international students have significant difficulty in cultural adjustment and fail to complete their academic goals in the host country. On the other hand, studies and reports from many North American campuses have shown that international students, especially Asians, utilize mental health facilities at an extremely low rate.

This paper's examination of the reasons for the low rate of utilization among Asian students revealed four barriers seriously hindering advising or counseling with Asian students: (a) Asian students' lack of knowledge about the counseling profession as a helping resource; (b) Asian students' fear of being mislabled, caused by the

unclear distinction between mental and physical illness or health in many Asian cultures; (c) American advisors' and counselors' lack of knowledge about Asian cultures; and (d) The discrepancies between the advisors' counselor's and the Asian students' expectations about the advising-counseling process. Furthermore, the general goals and strategies of working with Asian students have been discussed.

Two practical implications have appeared. First, international students, especially Asian students, may need more knowledge about the counseling profession as a helping resource. Information about the purpose, mental health facilities, personnel and the actual counseling process should be included as part of the orientation for all incoming foreign students. Second, when working with Asian students, the advisor or counselor must take time to learn about Asian cultures, taking a more active role in initiating counseling, structuring the interview and helping the Asian student to choose strategies to cope with their problems. The counselor must be aware that many assumptions of counseling which are based on white, middle-class, western cultural values may be antagonistic to the values held by Asian cultures.

In closing, one important point must be emphasized. No single form of counseling will be appropriate for all populations or all situations. The eventual success of counseling is heavily dependent upon the counselor's flexibility in using techniques appropriate not only to the cultural group, but to the individual as well. The issues discussed in this paper must not be blindly applied to all Asian students without consideration of individual differences.

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